

Omaha World-Herald
"Bush Upbeat Over Social Security"
By: Jake Thompson
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WASHINGTON -- Despite increasingly vocal opposition and signs of a skeptical public, President Bush on Tuesday promised to keep pressing for major restructuring of the Social Security retirement program.

In a White House interview, the president also noted that many Americans recognize that Social Security faces long-term financial problems. And he pointedly said that lawmakers who block congressional action could face "political consequences."

Still, Bush, who is in the early stage of a "60 stops in 60 days" campaign to drum up support for reworking Social Security, expressed confidence that he will persuade Congress to act, perhaps this year.

"I just happen to believe this is such a big issue, such an important issue, that eventually people will come and say, 'How can we work together to solve the issue?'" the president said. "The dialogue is just beginning."

Tuesday's 30-minute Oval Office interview was part of the Bush campaign. He spoke with six journalists from regional newspapers, including The World-Herald. It was his second such meeting in recent weeks.

Bush has visited 15 states so far. During each visit, he has promoted the need for change, trying to pressure lawmakers, as he sought to do with Sen. Ben Nelson in Omaha last month.

Nelson remains perhaps the only Senate Democrat who hasn't ruled out Bush's proposal to take money from current payroll taxes to create personal accounts invested in stocks and bonds.

Tuesday, Bush didn't bring up Nelson -- other than to mention his new nickname for the senator, "Benator." Bush also offered kind words about Nebraska's other senator, Republican Chuck Hagel.

Hagel last week introduced a Social Security bill proposing Bush-like private investment accounts, raising the retirement age from 67 to 68 and reducing benefits for early retirees.

"I applaud Senator Hagel and others should applaud Senator Hagel for being willing to say, 'There's a problem and I want to be part of the solution,'" the president said. "I will welcome other ideas, no matter who proposes them."

The president, gesturing frequently, seemed undaunted by the nearly united opposition to his ideas from Capitol Hill Democrats.

He also showed little concern that Americans seem to be skeptical.

In an ABC/Washington Post poll published Tuesday, 58 percent of respondents said that the more they hear about the president's ideas on Social Security, the less they like them.

Bush pointed to another number in the poll showing that two-thirds of Americans acknowledge that Social Security faces a problem when baby boomers start retiring in a few years. The poll also found majority support for private accounts.

"I'm optimistic, I really am," he said. "I think there's a very good chance Congress will respond to the desires of the people to solve the problem."

Here's the problem that Bush and others see: In 2018, according to government analysts, the amount of money flowing into Social Security won't be able to pay all benefits, so the system's trust fund will have to be tapped. By 2042, the trust fund and current payroll taxes won't support benefits at current levels

without tax increases, benefit cuts or both.

Bush restated his principles:

Today's elderly should see no changes in their Social Security checks.

Payroll taxes shouldn't be raised.

Private accounts carved out of the existing 12.4 percent payroll tax -- half paid by employees, the other half by their employers -- should be considered.

Many Democrats, Nelson included, want Bush to send his own detailed Social Security restructuring plan to Capitol Hill, an idea Bush rejected.

"Sure enough, the bill I send up will be -- phhtt!" the president said, making a sound like air escaping from a balloon. "The first bill to go down."

Instead, he wants Congress to develop a consensus around specifics that can pass the House and Senate.

"I believe there will be political consequences for people who don't want to participate in Congress coming up with a solution," Bush said.

But he also kept the door open: "I've said all ideas are on the table."